



# Iowa Children's Justice

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## Parents as Partners March 2010

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### Parent Partners

"Parents as Partners" is an approach designed to provide better outcomes around re-abuse and reunification for children and parents involved with the child welfare system. In Iowa, the Parent Program was established in 2007. By the end of 2009 Parent Partner sites were active in 31 of Iowa's 99 counties.

Parent Partners [mentors] can be volunteers, full or part-time employees who have been screened and trained to provide guidance and support to parents newly involved with the child welfare system. In most cases, a Parent Partner has had a personal experience with the child welfare system, and has been successfully reunified with his or her children for at least a year. Iowa DHS has developed basic guidelines for all Parent Partner programs. At the local level, agency sponsors hosting Parent Partner programs have also set up parameters for the local organization.

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### Reduced time in foster care

Parent Partners is recognized as being effective in a number of important areas. Recent national evaluations of Parent Partner programs have shown that the presence of a Parent Partner in a case can reduce the amount of time a child spends in foster care, increase the chance of reunification, and affect the quality of representation for parents. Parents often form a strong bond with a Parent partner because he/she has already successfully dealt with the same issues they are experiencing.

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### Quality representation

Parents often express a desire for more and better communication with their attorney. In one study, well over half of the parents surveyed said that their only contact with their attorney was at the hearing.

Because of their unique relationship with the parent, a Parent Partner may be in a position to assist the attorney in serving the client better. They may learn new information – such as change of address, new employment, etc. A well trained Parent Partner who understands the difference between their role and that of the legal advocate can be an asset to quality representation. Attorneys who are able to maintain a working relationship with a Parent Partner have been shown to improve the quality of their advocacy and fulfill ethical obligations to provide competent and diligent representation.

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### Parent support

In many places, Parent Partners accompany parents to court to lend support and help reduce the stress of an unfamiliar situation. In some locations around the country, Parent Partners also supervise parent child interactions; act as a parenting coach and role model. In some cases, Parent Partners later testify about this in court. Parent Partners can also teach parents self advocacy skills – including how to talk with attorneys and effectively express themselves in court. Their own personal experience makes them uniquely able to assist the family in a "real world" manner.

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## Contributions judges can make

In locations where the program is available, judges can

- 1) learn more about the local service, how to access it, what services they provide
- 2) request the services of a parent partner on specific cases
- 3) encourage parent attorneys to work with a Parent Partner to help their client to:
  - Understand how and when to contact their attorney
  - Complete necessary paperwork
  - Understand court procedures
  - Work through the anxiety about appearing in court
  - Successfully meet expectations and access services
- 4) ask parent partners how the court could support families more effectively

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## DHS case practice

Within DHS, Parent Partners work with families and child protective staff to support parents in their decision making, connect them with appropriate resources, teach advocacy skills and promote parent engagement and shared decision making throughout the life of a case.

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## Family Treatment Court

Parent Partners are currently involved with several of the family treatment courts in Iowa. They are assigned to families to provide them with individual support, to assist the family in understanding the court process, to help them develop sober lifestyle activities, and hold families accountable when they are not taking advantage of the resources of the Family Treatment Court.

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## For more information about Parent Partners

For more information about parent partners, the areas served, and resource information contact Sandy Lint at [slint@dhs.state.ia.us](mailto:slint@dhs.state.ia.us) or Kyla Madsen at [kmadsen@dhs.state.ia.us](mailto:kmadsen@dhs.state.ia.us) or visit the Parent Partner website at [http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/Parent\\_Partner\\_Program/index.html](http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/cppc/Parent_Partner_Program/index.html)

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## For more information on Iowa Children's Justice

For more information about Iowa Children's Justice contact Gail Barber at [gail.barber@iowacourts.gov](mailto:gail.barber@iowacourts.gov)

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